

Statement of Pamela O'Donnell  
Vice President, Local 34 UNITE HERE  
Connecticut General Assembly Committee on Public Health  
March 11, 2015  
SB 809, 813, 815

Chairman Ritter, Chairwoman Gerratana:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the bills pending before the committee. My name is Pamela O'Donnell. I am the graduate registrar in the Department of Economics at Yale University, and Vice President of UNITE HERE Local 34, the union for Clerical and Technical Workers at Yale University.

Local 34 and our sister Local 35 negotiate benefits for nearly 5,000 employees and their families. For decades we've been able to preserve benefits by using all the tools available in today's marketplace. A majority of our members are enrolled in the Yale Health Plan, a staff model HMO, and we are implementing member education programs to get people focused on improving their health.

I want to talk a little bit about what it means to bargain for health care benefits. Year after year, we heard from Yale University that health care costs are out of control and that we have to give back benefits. So we formed a joint labor/management task force to try to improve the quality of service we get through our plans, and find ways to work together to control costs and improve employees' health.

At Yale University we've done all the right things. Our employer has been responsible and worked on progressive solutions. Our members have been responsible and willing to change. We've achieved high quality of care and contained costs at the same time.

But none of this matters if the hospital costs continue to skyrocket. For years, our members in Greater New Haven could choose between Yale-New Haven Hospital and the Hospital of St. Raphael. Now an occasional few go to Milford, Griffin or Mid-State, but everyone else has only one choice.

We're doing everything the experts tell us to improve our health and control our costs, and the Yale Health Plan does a very good job keeping people out of the hospital unless it's necessary. But it will all be for nothing if we can't get control of hospital prices. At least in Southern Connecticut, the days of hospital competition are pretty much over. You really can't run a provider network without Yale New Haven, which means high prices, and we have no way to measure if those higher prices buy better care for our members and their families.

One of our problems is that we don't have any idea what our health plans pay hospitals for our care. Our joint task force is supposed to work to improve service delivery and save money. But when we ask for Yale-New Haven Hospital's prices, we're told that's a trade secret. So there's no way for us to evaluate if any cost increases are the result of people not taking care of themselves, or just old-fashioned price gouging.

If we want to preserve good health insurance coverage and good health care in Connecticut, the state is going to have to play a much stronger role protecting patients. We encourage the General Assembly to create an agency to measure and set benchmarks for health price and quality, and to make sure that hospital prices are transparent.